2010

Bending the Gaze: An Ethnographic Inquiry into Contemporary Contortion

Jacqueline C. Ward
University of Puget Sound

Bending the Gaze:
An Ethnographic Inquiry into Contemporary Contortion

Jacqueline C. Ward

The topic of this study, contortion and contortionists, may not be familiar to the majority of my readers. Contortion is a performing art, meant to be experienced visually through live theatre, yet here I am limited to describe the extraordinary feats of the contortionists with written word, on page. In light of this limitation, allow me a pause before I begin to verbally paint a picture so that my reader may accompany me more comfortably on further narrative ventures.

First, walk down a hallway lined with lockers and speckled with training apparatus. Enter a small room with beige carpeting, floor-to-ceiling mirrors and a variety of mats, straps and blocks. A handful of young adults, all contortion students, are training while chatting or grimacing in turn. A young man with curly blonde hair stretches his over-splits alongside his performance partner, a tall, thin woman, who complements her ballerina's physique with her attire of a leotard and legwarmers. They are sitting in the splits side-by-side, with their front foot resting on top of two folded mats, a distance of about three feet from the floor. Their back legs are on the plush carpet, her legwarmer parallel to his baggy sweat-pant leg. As they first maneuver themselves into the position, they are chatting about upcoming performances and verbally reviewing choreography. As the time they remain in the stretch lengthens, as their pelvises continue to lower towards to floor and the angle of their splits stretches well beyond 180-degrees, the chatting dies down. They are focusing on maintaining correct form as the pain increases, keeping focused and keeping calm.

On the other side of the room, a young woman works on her backbend, facing the mirror so she is able to correct her alignment. From standing, she arches back until her hands are flat on the floor, placed as close to her heels as possible. Then, while her feet remain firmly planted on that beige carpet, she lowers herself even further until her chest and chin are resting on the floor. She pauses there, with her chin placed on a small handkerchief she brought so as to avoid a rug burn on her chin. From there, she can see herself in the mirror perfectly as she looks forward through her legs. She brings her arms out from below her, wraps them around the front of her ankles, and places them daintily under her chin, her ankles now hooked in the crook of her elbows. This is the iconic contortion pose called "classic" (or "pretzel," or "chest-stand"), and from it she smiles at the imaginary audience in the mirror. Her face starts to show just a hint of red.

A fourth student is working on his "contortion push-ups" with the coach, a small Mongolian woman, herself an accomplished contortionist. The student starts in "classic," looking through his legs with his chest and chin on the floor. He places his hands firmly on the floor and she guides his hips for balance as he pushes up to a contortion handstand, his face looking forward and his feet dangling in front of his eyes. She guides his hips as he lowers himself back down, never coming out of the deep back arch. He takes a breath and pushes up again – he's working on doing fifty of these in a row.

There are many more images I would love to take the pleasure to verbally illustrate (such as the aptly named "butt-to-head," or the stretches that are so extreme it

takes three people to stretch every one), but I will limit myself to these selections, a brief snapshot of a training session with the contortionists at an internationally renowned circus school. I did not choose to describe the contortionists in performance - I'll leave the broadcasting of performance to YouTube and the analysis of performance to the theatre scholars. The study at hand has at its heart the desire to understand exactly that which goes on off-stage, backstage, and after the stage for the contortionists.

The previous sketches may sound bizarre and possibly incomprehensible to the average reader, but to the contortionist, they describe simply another day in the life. These contortionists were attracted to the circus arts because of the expressive capability and the enjoyment of physical training. They express fulfillment in performing for corporate gigs as well as artistic pieces. For these contortionists, contortion is an art, a craft, and often a career. One man I spoke with, who works as a manager for a traveling circus-theatre troupe said, after I had met with the contortionist in his group, "You've met [her]. She's a regular chick, she just happens to be a contortionist."

The fact of the matter is, however, that contortion and by extension contortionists, are often interpreted as an exotic performances of Otherness. Because of the impressiveness of their feats, unattainable by so many of the audience members, the performers themselves are characterized as Other. Ann Chisholm wrote, "as an irregular, distorted (and even bizarre) transmutation of the body…contortion poses a serious risk civically in that it does not manifest transcendence or progress but rather deviates from social conventions and standards of comportment. Thus, throughout the histories of Western culture, the bodies of contortionists often have been represented as raced, exotic, perversely sexual, dehumanized figures." [1]

Though feats of extreme flexibility appear in many corners of the ancient world, contortion entered the Western circus in the 18th century, and the development of contortion as a circus genre occurred in an environment in which it was triply enveloped by the male gaze. First, contortion came to being in a *patriarchal society* and took hold in Victorian times, when patriarchal values were particularly strong. Secondly, the circus *business* in American was overwhelmingly male-dominated. Thirdly, historic scholarship shows us that early circus *audiences* were primarily male as well.[2] Thus, Western contortion, in a society which already read the female body as sexual, was additionally subject to a strong current of patriarchal thought, approaching from a cultural level, the production perspective, and the audience interpretation.

Not surprisingly, considering such a history, Western culture saw the female form presenting displays of flexibility and agility and coded it as an erotic art form. Artistic, literary and scholarly production concerning the topic of contortion up to this point has been overwhelmingly focused on the sexualized and erotic presentation and interpretation of the art form.

Karl Toepfer's article "Twisted Bodies: Aspects of Female Contortionism in the Letters of Connoiseur,"[3] is a prime artifact for understanding the eroticized perception of the art form. A theatre professor, Toepfer attempts an historic approach of contortion and

---

[1] Ann Chisholm, "Acrobats, Contortionists, And Cute Children: the Promise and Perversity of U.S. Women's Gymnastics." *Signs*. Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2002) 426.

[2] Mark Irwin West. "A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America." *Journal of Social History*. Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1981) 266.

[3] Published in Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring 1999) of *TDR: The Drama Review*.

focuses specifically on its sexual nature. He explains performances and relates correspondence between contortionist aficionados, emphasizing erotic elements. Throughout the entire article, Toepfer takes these erotic dynamics for granted, assuming they are inherent to the genre. He, himself admitted in this essay, as he recounted his own experience watching an act of contortion, "the spectacle of [two contortionists] coiling serpentinely around each other excited me violently"[4] and implies that the inherent qualities of "strength and vulnerability" create an "ambiguous combination…which, during contortion, is the inflammatory catalyst for male excitement."[5] Such an account exemplifies the patriarchal, sexual reading of contortion and presents it as the normative male response to female contortionists.

Nichola Haxell takes a more critical eye to such sexual coding as she explores the perception and representation of contortion in relation to cultural norms and expectations. Haxell analyses nineteenth-century French literature and art concerned with the subject of female circus performers, and she uncovers a persistent male gaze. She points out that representations of contortionism were consistently "thematic of desire, domination, display and creativity which…played out through the *persona* of the female circus performer."[6] She continues, "the…circus performer was coded for erotic display and impact by male writers and artists and…she was situated within a patriarchal framework of male-female sociopolitical, as well as erotic, relations."[7] Haxell uncovers the power of the viewers in coding the contortionists in a "soliloquy of male desire."[8]

These articles and artifacts present contortion as persistently eroticized by its viewers, those who represent it in literature and art, and society at large. They pull from the perspectives of artists, academics, aficionados and audience members. Yet, one strong and integral voice is lacking – we have not inquired after the perspective of the contortionists themselves.

As Nichola Haxell wrote:

> "The female circus performer has always lacked a female voice for advocacy…It is unfortunate that no female voice from the nineteenth century has emerged to challenge the soliloquy of male desire and the exclusively gendered gaze cast on the popular icon of 'la dame du cirque' – and that as a result the commentator's gaze can only be a polarized on, directed *at* the male in the audience rather than *from* the woman in the sawdust ring."[9]

There is precisely the gap that this study hopes to fill. Considering the pervasive sexualization of the image of contortionist, this study looks at how this perspective affects the lives of individual contortionists and seeks to understand how the individuals, the contortionists themselves, are situated in this socio-cultural conversation.

---

[4] Toepfer 105.
[5] Toepfer 126-7.
[6] Nichola A. Haxell. "'Ces Dames du Cirque': A Taxonomy of Male Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Art." *MLN*, Vol. 115, No. 4 (Sep., 2000) 783.
[7] Haxell 783.
[8] Haxell 800.
[9] Haxell, 800.

I was particularly interested in the sociological dialogue between the individual and the institution, between the contortionist and American society. In the face of the pervasive sexualization of the image of contortionist, where is the voice of the performers themselves, and what is that voice conveying?

My interest in such an approach was inspired by the introduction Brett Harvey wrote in her book The Fifties: A Women's Oral History. It read:

> "I had an image in my mind of the prevailing culture as a giant thumb pressing women back and down into the mold of wife and mother. But the real women I interviewed refused to fit neatly into my theories. They lurched, struggled, wavered, veered, regrouped, and floundered…Women made their choices out of complex knots of motives that included their own emotional needs and family dynamics as well as cultural and social pressures…Their stories demonstrate the complex range of strategies that women of the fifties employed to accommodate themselves to their narrow spheres."[10]

Just as Harvey found movement, action and agency among women in the fifties, I was curious to see if contemporary contortionists applied similar action in their own struggle against a patriarchal structure. My primary focus was to uncover how the cultural perception of contortionist as erotic influences the performance and experience of individual contemporary contortionists. This project examines the strategies contortionists have employed to respond to the eroticization of their performance and explores the role that individual artistic agency plays within a dominant cultural ideology.

The resulting study is an ethnography of the training, performance and individual lives of contortionists. My research spanned three months and drew me up and down the West Coast, where I focused on the cities of Seattle, Portland and San Francisco and included a few performers from around the country and the world that passed through the West Coast on tour or had relocated here permanently. This relatively small geographic focus was a condition required simply by limited time and funds.

I modeled my research after a participant-observation methodology, though I had to be flexible with those parameters considering the short time span of my research and the unique arrangement of the community of my study. In total, I interviewed nine contortionists and six other circus performers and producers. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I attended as many performances and training sessions that I could. To my delight, I was able to participate in all the classes and trainings that I attended.

This brings me to my next point. Let me disclose early on that my initial interest in this topic came about through my own experience in training and performing contortion. I have been performing for a few years and was partially motivated to conduct this study by the amount of sexualizing remarks I had heard. In this study, I found that my familiarity with contortion history, techniques and my visible skill level, which functioned as physical proof of my commitment, worked to legitimize my interest in the eyes of other contortionists. Though I had the expected troubles tracking down performers or scheduling meeting times, I found my interviewees to be welcoming and

---

[10] Brett Harvey. The Fifties: A Women's Oral History. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

forth-coming once we sat down face-to-face. I was able to present myself as an interested peer as opposed to a scrutinizing outsider. To be frank, many contortionists would be hesitant to any stranger showing a particularly high level of interest in their craft, considering the common fetishization of flexibility. As I was able to prove myself a peer, I immediately assuaged that specific hesitancy as well as other social insecurities that come about when a researcher enters a specific community with the perspective of an outsider.

As a pre-established "insider" I was able to speak comfortably about specific moves and techniques without momentary disruptions to explain terminology. I was grateful to be able to participate in classes and trainings, as I have no understanding as to whether the classes I attended would have allowed observers. Many of my interviewees were flattered that their craft was of interest to academic inquiry.

Though I believe that my insider status was largely beneficial to the integrity of my data, it certainly brought with it certain research challenges. I had to be careful not to use my research as a way of validating my own experience as a contortionist or proving any previously developed beliefs. I held my own potential bias in mind and consistently updated my interview guide if I felt the questions were leading in one way or the other. I am confident that my previous work research in anthropology prepared me with a balanced perspective and a heightened awareness.

In fact, I found that I was far from relying on my own personal experience; many contortionists were already aware of the gender dynamics I was trying to understand and brought such issues up of their own accord. More than once, interviewees jumped in with their own comments as soon as I explained my project to them, without the need of any topical prelude or prodding questions. Issues of gender and sexiness even arose in casual banter in classes I attended without any prompting on my part. Though I must acknowledge the possible influence of my presence as a proclaimed researcher, I do believe these issues arose because they hold genuine importance in the experience of these people.

For sake of confidentiality, I have substituted pseudonyms for the names of individual performers as well as identifiable performance troupes and training spaces/schools. Lastly, I have used and will continue to employ the word "sexualization" as a common theme throughout this paper. This concept includes "sexual objectification, valuing people primarily for their sex appeal, and setting sexiness as a standard of physical attractiveness."[11] I use this term broadly, relying on a culture consciousness of what "sexy" implies.

A NOTE ABOUT CONTORTION AND CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS

Before continuing, allow me a tangent of brief history and possible clarification. Though there is evidence of cases of extreme flexibility in an array of ancient cultures for spiritual or ritualistic purposes, "contortion" today is a performance art within the realm of circus arts.

The circus in modern times arose in the late 18th century, as an evolution of performing equestrian entertainment troupes. To augment the feats of trained horses and

[11] Janet Nowatzki and Marian N. Morry. "Women's Intentions Regarding, and Acceptance of, Self-Sexualizing Behavior." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 33 (2009) pp. 95-107.

their riders, producers added jugglers, clowns and actors. Soon this expanded to include aerialists, contortionists, menageries and freak shows. With the American addition of the easily-transported canvas tents and the expanse of the railroad system, traditional American circus was complete. Circuses set up in the large spaces outside of the town, announced their entrance with a grand parade through the town and performed for a week or so before picking up and moving across country again.

For my research, I didn't have to hop on the back of a brightly painted caboose or peek through the flap of a canvas tent to find contortionists to interview. I found them in coffee shops, on university campuses, and following curriculum in accredited circus schools. The image that most people hold when they think of "the circus," with tents and elephants and sawdust and three rings, has largely faded into American history (kept alive by a few traveling circuses struggling against animal rights activists and the changing tastes of the American public).

Now, circus performers make a career just as other performers do; working gigs when they come about, performing with an established troupe at times, going on tour if the pieces fit, working odd jobs or developing alternate careers until they build a reputation or make the right connections. Circus performers are able to establish a home in one location. There are now established circus schools in the States which offer professional training, and students attend classes morning and night in their chosen discipline as well as other supporting classes such as dance, tumbling, even circus history and business skills. Of course, not all performers attend such professional training programs, some simply start sticking their necks out where they can, performing at bars and clubs, billing their act in local variety shows, producing their own shows with friends if all else fails. Many have second jobs; many are attending college or have in the past. Circus artists are more assimilated into American society than they were a century ago, when they were the suspect yet inspiring wanderers.

Along with this shift in lifestyle, there has been a marked shift in performance style. On that theme, one circus manager I spoke with said, "people started thinking of circus not like circus freaks, but as a type of artistry." One woman I interviewed – Katya a handbalancer originally from Russia who is now working in Seattle – experienced the transition from traditional to contemporary circus within the span of her own training. In Russia, she entered the circus world after training in ballet as a child, and sought to bring the emotion and expressivity of dance to her circus performance. She was frustrated, however, by the traditional style of her training and ended up leaving her first coach for that reason. Katya described this traditional style as "you do a trick, you go down, you present yourself. You do another trick, you go down, you present yourself." As she was saying this, she mimicked the traditional presentation – arms out, chin up, chest puffed, smiling and asking for applause. It is very presentational and oriented towards impressing the audience. She was disillusioned with this style and she said to herself, "I don't want to do this for my life." She "wanted something interesting" and "wanted to have a message." With this impulse, she sought out a well-known Russian circus director who was on the forefront of the contemporary circus movement. This director was known for his work with "personality." He would "find in you what makes you special and pull that out." With him she developed an act inspired by the dancing of Isadora

Duncan[12] in which has a large white veil draped over her feet. She describes it as a modern dance, "but upside-down." This is exactly the impulse that drove the contemporary circus movement. Performers now seek more than sheer technical prowess and impressive feats; they utilize the circus arts as a medium for expressive, artistry and creativity.

A NOTE ABOUT GENDER

The image conjured up in the majority of American minds when one prompts it with contortion, is "a little Asian girl," as one of my interviewees said. In the States, there is certainly a greater amount of ethnic diversity in contortion, but the performers are still overwhelmingly female. Many circus performers I spoke with, people with deep connections in the circus world, had trouble thinking of a male contortionist they knew or had seen perform.

This gender disparity is an engrossing question in and of itself, but I cannot allow too much of an aside to explore it here. Let me just take a moment to assure my reader that the distinction is largely socio-cultural in influence, and there is not as much biological determinism for flexibility as many assume. There are two groups of evidence that allow me to say this with confidence. First, a historical perspective. As Toepfer wrote, "only in the 20th century has female contortionism completely eclipsed male contortionism for the favor of audiences."[13] Previous to this time, Western circuses and variety shows saw substantially more male contortionists than today. Second, it is not uncommon for male circus artists to have the high level of flexibility required of a contortionist, though they choose to apply it to a different discipline, most commonly floor acrobatics or handstands.

Erik, a male contortionist training in San Francisco, had some historic insight into the gender disparity. He said, "when contortion started in China and Mongolia, there were more men doing it – it was more of a male sport." He mentioned a ancient text called "The Book of Ten Thousand Tricks," which is "a list of all the things that are possible" in acrobatics and contortion, and they are all illustrated with male figures and intended for men to execute. Even today, "pretzel and catch-ankles[14] are just part of the training," for male Chinese acrobats. A similar dynamic occurs with contemporary Russian male acrobats. Another contortionist, Cristie said, "Russia is pumping out acrobats…the handbalancers are really flexible, like *really* flexible, but there's only one trick and there'll be no other contortion in the act." Clearly, these well-trained male acrobats are just as flexible as women; they have the potential to be high-level contortionists, but have chosen to pursue handbalancing or floor acrobatics instead.

Thus, it is fair to say that any biological differences in potential for flexibility are overshadowed by cultural trends and societal expectations. As another contortionist I spoke with said, "social support has been there for women to do contortion in America and the social support has not been there for men. It's the same thing for men in ballet"

---

[12] Isadora Duncan (1877-1927) is often considered the founder of modern dance. She taught a style of movement that rejected the rigidity of traditional ballet in favor of improvisation and emotion. She is most recognizable for her dances with elaborate scarves and veils.

[13] Toepfer, 105.

[14] Pretzel, or "classic," is the pose in which the contortionist's chest is on the ground and his or her head is looking past her feet, placed on the ground in front. Catch-ankles is the pose in which the contortionists bends entirely backwards and grabs his or her ankles with his or her hands, looking perfectly folded in half.

when they are "expected to do football" instead. She continued, "the honest truth is – guys can bend! But we still live in a context where masculine means strong and feminine means weak." Female contortionists are much more common than male contortionists, largely because of societal pressures and expectations; these influence the decision of the circus artist to specialize in one discipline or another and result in a great variance in gender distribution across the circus genres.

I was pleased to make contact with a few male contortionists for my research. Though performers Portland and Seattle told me they had never even met a male contortionist, San Francisco was home to a handful.

UNWANTED SEXUALIZATION

Throughout my research, I heard many stories of unwanted sexualization. Contortionists were consistently approached after shows by audience members insinuating after a date or a potential hookup. Myung Hee, a young woman now pursuing contortion as a hobby while she is working towards a career in law said, "I don't say it anymore to guys" because she was so frustrated by "guys intimating they wanted to have sex" or showing "renewed interested when they heard that." She felt "objectified in every sense of the word."

Lara, a Portland-based contortionist and painter, explained that she had no idea how sexualized contortion was until she started training in her university's dance room. Male students started making remarks about it and she realized, "my association with [contortion] is childhood dance class. Their association is kama sutra." Likewise, all of the male contortionists said that they have been accustomed to people asking if they can perform "auto-fellatio." Brianna, a contortionist and handbalancer, mentioned that her boyfriend will often come watch her shows and he will hear the unknowing audience member nearby make some sexual comment concerning her performance. She even had an audience member ask her "can you teach my girlfriend how to be more flexible? I'd like to try some new positions in the bedroom!"

One of the circus-theater companies Brianna works with was recently hired to perform at a wedding. It was a large, out-doors wedding and the performers were asked to add ambience to the event by wandering through the crowds performing in character. Brianna was wandering through the space, doing handstands, contortion and some simple tumbling. At one point, she noticed a "small group of guys saying 'come talk to us.'" She was focused on being professional and creating a positive environment for the event, so she wandered over and talked to them. Once she got there their intentions became clear. She said, "Some were being more aggressive. Not physical, but they would say, 'come back to the house.'" Two of the men just kept repeating, "Nice boobs, nice boobs."

In reaction to situations such as these, Brianna said, "it's my art, I don't want it to be taken that way. I want them to admire the strength and beauty of it and not make them," she paused, "feel horny." She finished the sentence with a smile, seeming to laugh off the discomfort of the idea. This was a common sentiment for contortionists in the face of unwanted sexualization. Many felt it was "very disrespectful" and "trivializing." Every contortionist had some sort of story about a time they experienced sexual remarks, and this sexualization, when unsolicited, unanimously caused frustration.

SELF-SEXUALIZING

Contortionists, however, do regularly incorporate a certain amount of 'sexiness' into their own acts. In training and choreography sessions, I heard the world "sexy" used as a positive adjective. Contortionists described their own acts as "saucy" or "flirty" and talked about how it can be a very successful way of engaging the audience.

For example, Katya believes that a very good act must have some "sex appeal." She is a performer with the highest level of technique, performing one-arm handstands of all shapes and extreme control. However, she herself believes that "you don't have to have perfect technique to be a good performer." You have to have "something they want to look at." She has heard her friends, other circus performers, express frustration and bewilderment when other, less skilled performers get booked for shows, but she knows it is because those performers "are good to look at!"

Similarly, Erik, a contortionist that performs independently as well as with the Cabaret Consortium, a "dark, underground circus," feels comfortable performing in nightclubs and 21+ parties, in costumes of fishnets and spandex. However, he would never do anything explicitly sexual like stripping or pornographic photography (He has received and rejected offers for both). Erik was fine incorporating some "tease" into his performance, but he said it is "annoying if people assume that you're a sex object." Contortionists, it seems, are comfortable being seen as sexy as long as that isn't the only factor for which they are valued. A certain amount of self-sexualization is accepted, and even encouraged, as contortionists seek to create an engaging act.

ANALYSIS

Throughout my interviews and observations, I discovered four strategies consistently employed by contortionists across the board. The first two are considerations; these are factors that contortionists weigh in the process of deciding their own self-sexualizing actions. The second two are a pair of resulting beliefs; they form a type of ideology that contortionists pull from to negotiate cognitive dissonance. The latter are beliefs that have developed out of the consistent confrontation of unwanted sexualization. The contortionist has learned how to maneuver through the overarching social structure in a self-aware and engaged manner. All four strategies are methods contortionists employ to situate themselves as the active subject of this conversation.

Spectrum of Sexiness

As mentioned previously, contortionists were comfortable incorporating a certain amount of sexiness, but there was a strong ethic to not overdo it; contortionist looked down on performance styles that were simply *too* sexy. There are a wide variety of styles in contortion performance, ranging from the family-friendly, clown-inspired acts that Brianna performs at school assemblies, to saucy adult shows Erik performs with Cabaret Consortium, and ranging even further, to be sure.[15] This variance of performance styles lies on what I call the *spectrum of sexiness*, from "family-friendly" to "adult-only." Contortionists had artistic agency in determining where on this spectrum any given performance of theirs lay; they considered factors such as choreography (from how they

[15] Zlata comes to mind. She is a German contortionist whose website is designed to look like a pornography website in both layout and content. Additionally, Karl Toepfer in "Twisted Bodies" brings to light many examples of highly sexual contortion performances in the turn of the century.

position moves to what facial expressions they use), to costuming and music in order to control how "sexy" or "not sexy" a performance of theirs was.

On this spectrum, I found that most contortionists had a very specific point which, in accordance to their own values, they would not cross. For example, Erik said that he is comfortable being "sexy" but not "sexual." Cristie liked "sultry" but not "sexy." Interestingly, there was not a consensus between contortionists as to where the line of acceptability fell. Each contortionist could point to his or her limit of sex appeal in performance, but these personal limits did not all line up with each other.

Take, for example, Luke, a male contortionist from San Francisco. Luke is soft-spoken and carries a gentle and genuine air. He had been training in contortion for a few years, which he started after developing a solid foundation in yoga. In his interview, he was adamant against acts that were too sexy, calling overt sexiness a "cheap trick" and believes that a lot of people "use it to make up for a lack of skill."

However, as I overheard Luke and his performance partner Riku brainstorming about a new act they were creating, Luke was the one in the duo that was pushing to have a sexier feel. While his partner just wanted to be "animals or something," Luke thought it would be a stronger act if they were humans with some sort of relationship. He wants to create an act that is "sexy, without being raunchy about it."

This seeming contradiction, in which he calls sexiness a "cheap trick" while concurrently choreographing sexiness into his own act, is clarified when we line up these different values on the spectrum of sexiness. Luke is comfortable with a "sexy" act, but one that goes too far he considers "raunchy." There is a large variation of sexiness available on the "acceptable" side of the spectrum; however, as soon as an act crosses the point of acceptability, he views it as "cheap."

My interactions with Luke also illustrated the discrepancies between each individual's personal limits. As we were cooling down and packing up after a contortion class, I began chatting with Luke about the different styles of contortion. He specifically brought up the group that Erik performs with, Cabaret Consortium. This darker circus has performed at rock shows, the Super Bowl and private events. They preen a dark and sexy aesthetic. In this conversation, Luke began joking about how overly sexy this group's shows are. He even showed me a move that he and some friends had made up to jokingly poke fun at the group, complete with choreography and it's own nickname. He playfully showed it to me: standing, facing me with an exaggerated sexy face, complete with pouty lips and slightly lowered eyelids, he stuck his bum up in the air as he bent forward to touch one hand on the ground, the other hand on his hip. He then did a body roll back to standing before slowly sliding to the splits, letting a hand stroke his inner thigh. The routine then complete, he got up, laughing. The next day I was in the studio when Erik and his partner were training. At one point the two of them took a moment to review troupe choreography. Though certainly not as exaggerated or as playful, the high-energy moves did incorporate enough body rolls and flirtatious faces for me to see where Luke's playful parody got its inspiration.

Erik's performance style with Cabaret Consortium was the perfect example of overly sexualized contortion performance in Luke's eyes. However, it was still well situated in Erik's own personal spectrum of acceptability. In a one-on-one interview, Erik had very similar things to say about making contortion too sexy. He said, "it cheapens the act – it's taking the art and kind of exploiting it." Clearly, he still has limits as to how

sexy he will go as well, but his personal tolerance is further down the spectrum than Luke's.

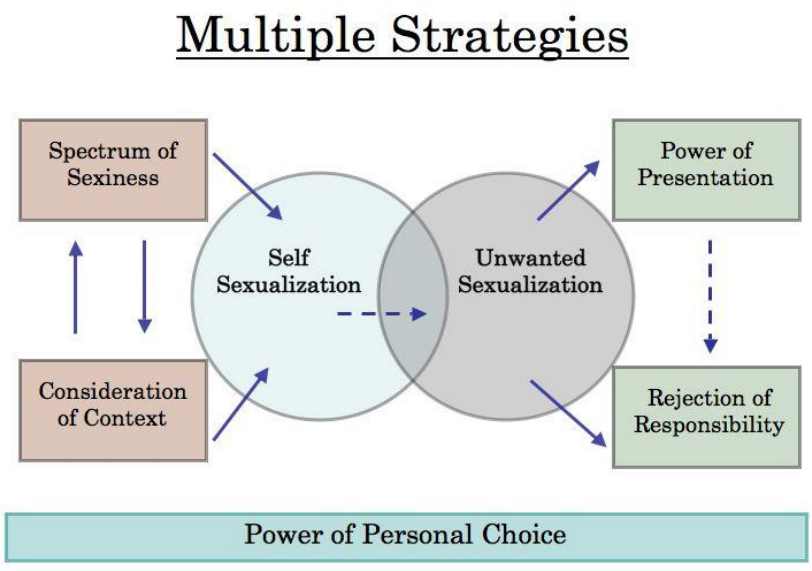
What is important about the spectrum of sexiness is that each contortionist is confident in his or her own personal limits and avoids crossing them. The contortionists I spoke with had a clear understanding of where their limits were. Contortionists are not always performing *at* their limit, though. Brianna, for example, performs with a physical theatre troupe that presents at assemblies and family-friendly shows *as well as* with a troupe that does primarily 21 + shows. Once a contortionist knows where his or her limits are, they have fluidity within that as well.

Consideration of Context

Considering the wide range of performance styles that a single contortionist allows him or herself to perform, there must be a method of determining which performance requires which performance style. The process of determining where on the spectrum of sexiness a certain show will lie is achieved through the *consideration of context*.

Consideration of context functions on two levels. Prior to committing to a performance, contortionists consider the context of the show and weigh if that show requires them to cross their own personal limits. If that concern is assuaged and the contortionist agrees to a show[16] contortionists then draw on their knowledge of the surrounding context to decide where on their *own* spectrum of sexiness to place their act for that performances. Contextual factors include age range and culture of the audience, location of the venue, other performances on the bill and the overall vision of the producers or directors.

Erik, the subject of Luke's playful mocking, clearly is comfortable performing in fishnets and glitter, with a saucy and flirtatious manner. However, he has performed in many situations in which that style would be unacceptable. In more family-friendly shows, he performs his "doll act," in which he plays a ragdoll toy and humorously flops through various contortion poses. He described this act as "playful" and "character-based." In it, he wears trousers and a floppy hat and plays a naïve and endearing character. In fact, Cristie, who trains at the same circus school, actually used Erik's doll act as her choice example of how contortion can be *non*-sexual. Simply



[16] Considering other logistical factors as well, such as schedule and pay.

because Erik is comfortable performing very sexy pieces doesn't mean he is limited to those. Instead, he factors in the context of the performance to determine where he feels most comfortable for that particular show.

Power of Presentation

Contortionists weigh the factors of the spectrum of sexiness and the consideration of context as they decide to incorporate a certain degree of self-sexualization. However, as previous accounts in this paper attest to, it is very common for contortionists to receive additional unwanted sexualization. As a result of this experience, after hearing comments time and time again, contortionists develop a pair of beliefs to manage such dissonance between their presentation and the audience interpretation.

First, there is a belief in the *power of presentation*. I heard time and time some variation on the sentiment, "if you present it in a non-sexual way, then it isn't sexual" (as worded by Cristie here). And that was that. Contortionists seemed to believe that their expressive decisions created an objective truth in performance, and if the audience chose to view the performance in a different light (for example, if the contortionist was presenting a non-sexualized act and the audience still reacted as if it were erotic), then the audience is simply *wrong.*

Rejection of Responsibility

Another consistent technique in reaction to unwanted sexualization is the *rejection of responsibility*. Contortionists often responded to those audience members that eroticize their performances by claiming that such an interpretation is not their doing or their responsibility. They place the responsibility entirely in the arena of the audience members who they purport chose to view contortion as sexual, or chose to view it otherwise. Saran, a Mongolian contortionist with many years of professional experience, said "we cannot control people's imaginations and minds, but the way we present and perform it is an art." Myung Hee said that, though contortionists are "always running the risk of someone taking their own personal opinion," she believes that "no matter *what* they bring, it's my own experience and expression."

Clearly, power of presentation and rejection of responsibility go hand in hand. Contortionists believe that if they present the performance as art, then it is art. Then, if the audience chooses to interpret it as sexy, it was not their doing or their problem.

Power of Personal Choice

Underlining all of these processes and dynamics is the *power of personal choice*. Throughout the interviews, as contortionists told stories and remembered moments, there was a clear distinction between decisions contortionists chose to make for themselves and those that were pushed onto them from outside. Take, for example, a series of decisions that Brianna made.

Brianna was recently invited to go on tour with a travelling sideshow. This group is known for their dark aesthetic and is proud to have "genuine human oddities." Brianna was excited about the offer, as she is looking to expand her performance experiences. However, after considering the possibility, she decided to decline. She said, "I wanted to do it for the experience, but I'm not sure if I would have enjoyed it...they would have asked me to change the act, the music, costumes, how I move…all the female performers

perform half-naked and they're all kind of crazy." She didn't feel comfortable performing in that environment because she would have experienced outside pressure to change her act in order to conform to the sexy aesthetic of this group.

Contrast that experience with a story she also told me about a burlesque-inspired circus show that she performed in recently. A group she has been performing with for years put on this show and she said the producers, "know my personality and tell me I don't have to be sexy." In this show, "everyone took off their clothes" or at least "brought sex appeal to the act" and she said, "my piece felt out of place." In reaction, she herself decided to change her costume to "something [she] couldn't normally wear for a family-friendly show" and allowed herself to modify "the present [she has] onstage." In the latter example, she decided of her own accord to make her act a bit sexier. Because this impulse was coming from within, she felt empowered by her decision. In contrast, she felt uncomfortable with the idea of a director or producer *telling her* that she had to change her act.

The Gaze

This paper has examined the roles that contortionists enact to assert their individuality and claim their own decision-making power as a performer. I have been purposely focusing on the lived experience of these performers, but it is also important to incorporate a moment of analysis on the performance of contortion as well. The arts hold a powerful position in society, as they can solidify, reiterate, or deconstruct societal norms and values. Performances that incorporate the body have additional power as meanings and interpretations are projected onto the physical beings. Specifically, the audience/performer relationship can hold many power inequalities.

Laura Mulvey, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"[17] asserts that, in a performative context, those who gaze (the audience) hold the power and those who are gazed upon (the performer) are reduced to images. In cinema, the male consistently holds the active gaze while the female is characterized by her passivity and valued for her *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Such a perspective applies to contortion, as well, as the contortionist on stage is presenting her body to be gazed upon by an audience from a society filled with phallocentric priming. Contortionists are thus submitting themselves to a situation that will almost certainly objectify them. From this perspective, contortionists that present their acts as sexy are a result of internalized objectification; the performers are reverting to exhibitionism since they are valued for their image.

However, Barbara Freedman points out that Mulvey's theory was specific to cinema and that live theatre brings a different dynamic to the audience/performer relationship.[18] She asserts that the living quality of live performers, who share the same space as live audience members, changes the situation entirely. In theatre, the power is not concentrated in the hands (or eyes) of the viewers because the live actors always have the possibility of gazing directly back. With this perspective, contortion holds the possibility of objectification alongside the possibility of an active *subjectification.*[19]

---

[17] Published in *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3. (1975) pp. 6-18.
[18] Barbara Freedman, "A Fractured Gaze: Theater, Cinema, Psychoanalysis." Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis and Shakespearean Comedy. Ithaca: Cornell Press, 1991.
[19] See Jacki Wilson, The Happy Stripper: Pleasure and Politics in the New Burlesque.

In fact, arguably holds more potential for performer subjectification as the direct gaze is a common and powerful tool in the circus arts. I have overheard many conversations among circus performers revering the importance of engaging the audience through a smile, a nod, or an intense look, depending on the style and mood of the piece. Most contortionists have such moments specifically choreographed into the acts. Often, it is precisely these moments, when the performer looks up from her focus to make eye contact with the audience, that entice the greatest applause. The contortionist's gaze is certainly a powerful one and a tool that is used regularly.

Even as the audience gazes on the contortionist, the contortionist gazes back, perhaps defiantly, perhaps teasingly, and perhaps simply cordially. This dialectical gaze situates the contortionist as an active, involved actor in this conversation of sexualization and objectification. The contortionist invites, challenges, humors or denies the gaze of the audience.

CONCLUSION

Contortionists, though functioning within a structure of patriarchal male gaze, have carved pathways in which they are able to maneuver with individual agency within this structure. They incorporate or reject their own sexualization based on the surrounding environment and their own goals. They determine the extent of their own self-sexualization through weighing the factors of their own spectrum of sexiness with their consideration of context. Once confronted with unwanted sexualization, they manage this discomfort through their belief in the power of presentation and the rejection of responsibility. With this arrangement in place, they are constantly the protagonists of their own narrative.

There are many interlocking factors that this study was not equipped to addressed. This study would be augmented greatly by a similar look at contortion from the audience's perspective. Such a perspective would help to understand how much power is in the performer's presentation versus the audience's interpretation. In addition to the issues of sexualization, I touched upon a variety of other enticing issues that I wasn't able to fully dig into. For example, I discovered certain rhetorical dialogues about class values and commodification (such as dialogues of high art vs. low art; art vs. entertainment and what is viewed as "cheap" or "classy), the presence of Puritan work ethic (contortionists emphasize how much work they've had to put into training, how they were not naturally born flexible, and specifically incorporate displays of strength into their act alongside flexibility), and many other intriguing factors.

This study casts light on the positive possibilities for self-determination within an undesired structure. This approach applies to gender studies, anthropology and performance studies to understand where individuals and performance lie within a greater cultural context. Through this study, we understand that individuals are always active in establishing their own place. They are not limited to the roles of victim or activist; they are simply (and extraordinarily) *actors*, responding and evolving as they adjust and add to the world around them.

Works Cited

Chisholm, Ann. "Acrobats, Contortionists, And Cute Children: the Promise and Perversity of U.S. Women's Gymnastics." *Signs*. Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2002) pp. 415-450.

Freedman, Barbara. "A Fractured Gaze: Theater, Cinema, Psychoanalysis." Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis and Shakespearean Comedy. Ithaca: Cornell Press, 1991.

Harvey, Brett. The Fifties: A Women's Oral History. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

Haxell. Nichola A. "'Ces Dames du Cirque': A Taxonomy of Male Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Art." *MLN*, Vol. 115, No. 4 (Sep., 2000) pp. 783-800.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3. (1975) pp. 6-18.

Nowatzki, Janet and Morry, Marian N. "Women's Intentions Regarding, and Acceptance of, Self-Sexualizing Behavior." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 33 (2009) pp. 95-107.

Toepfer, Karl. "Twisted Bodies: Aspects of Female Contortionism in the Letters of a Connoisseur." *TDR*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Spring, 1999) pp. 104-136.

West, Mark Irwin. "A Spectrum of Spectators: Circus Audiences in Nineteenth-Century America." *Journal of Social History*. Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1981) pp. 265-270.

Willson, Jacki. The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque. London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2008.